One Moon, Two Moons – Oneness and Mindfulness in the Teachings of Zen Master Dogen

Master Ungan Donjo in the Tan district was sweeping the ground one day. Master Dogo Enchi said: *You are very diligent in your work.* Master Ungan replied: *There is someone who is not diligent.* Master Dogo said: *If that is true, you must have a second moon.* Then Master Ungan stood up his broom and said: *How many moons are here?* Master Dogo left without saying anything.

[Shinji Shobogenzo Book 1, Koan No. 83]

The expression *two moons* (or sometimes, *two heads*) was often used in Chinese Buddhism to indicate a state of divided consciousness. The state when we are thinking about something while we are doing something else is one example of this. But the Buddhist state is *oneness in action* – a state in which there is no second moon. In this koan story from the Shinji Shobogenzo, Master Dogo praises Master Ungan for his diligence. Master Ungan, however, feels that these words are one-sided, so he states the opposite viewpoint: there is part of me that is not diligent. Master Ungan is saying that he is just sweeping the floor; his action is neither diligent nor lazy. It is just real action in the real world. But Master Dogo misinterprets Master Ungan's words to mean that there is some division or self-consciousness in him; that there is one Ungan who feels diligent, and another Ungan who doesn't. He expresses this by saying that Master Ungan must have a second moon. When our sight is clear, we see one moon in the sky. When our sight is clouded we see two moons, even though there is only one real moon. Master Ungan holds his broom by his side, and standing there very straight and concentrated he asks, "*How many moons are here?*" He challenges Master Dogo to find any division or fault in his behavior. Master Dogo then leaves without saying anything further.

This simple story illustrates the meaning of *oneness in action*, one of the most important aspects to the Buddhism that Dogen teaches, and for that reason it is important to discuss it again and again. Particularly since this teaching of *oneness* is closely related to our understanding of *mindfulness*, a term that Buddhist teachers in the West frequently use to point us towards right action.

I was fortunate enough to live in a non-western society (Japan) for more than twenty years, during which time I slowly came to see a difference between what I would term a "Western intellectual view" (my own) and an "Eastern holistic view". And I have come to believe that the difference between these two views confuses our understanding of *oneness in action*, *mindfulness* and other related Buddhist concepts that have arrived in the West but that originated in Eastern cultures.

It is interesting to note that although Dogen talks about *oneness in action* many times in his writings (oneness of subject and object, oneness of actor and act, oneness of mind and the world, oneness of time and being), he mentions the term *mindfulness* only infrequently. When he does so, for example in *The Eight*

Truths of a Great Human Being and *The Thirty-seven Elements of Bodhi* chapters of the Shobogenzo, the term is usually included in quotations from early sutras. In the first of these two chapters, commenting on a quotation from a sutra, he says "*There is mindfulness that exists in moments of owning one's body and mindfulness that exists in moments of having no mind. There is conscious mindfulness and there is mindfulness in which there is no body.*" It is clear from this quotation that Dogen does not necessarily associate *mindfulness* with mind. Mindfulness existing in moments of having no mind suggests a mindfulness that can be found in a state where we are not in the intellectual area, where we are not thinking about or monitoring what we are doing. And mindfulness in which there is no body suggests a state in which we are apparently unaware of what our body is doing. These are descriptions of the state of *oneness in action*. Later in the same chapter he says "*Mindfulness as a power is a great brute pulling a person's nostrils*", a reference to a koan story in which Master Shakkyo Ezo yanks the nose of Master Seido Chizo in order to explain the meaning of space *[Shinji Shobogenzo Book 3, Koan No. 49]*. Again it is clear from this story that it is simple and direct action that Dogen is identifying with the term *mindfulness*.

The Sanskrit term translated as *mindfulness* is SMRITI (SATI in Pali). The everyday meaning of the Sanskrit term SMRITI is nearer to the intellectual function of remembering, calling to mind, concentrating the mind, being mindful. But interestingly, the meaning of SATI in Pali (the original language of the Buddhist Sutras) also includes the meanings of recognition, consciousness, wakefulness, alertness, lucidity. The term SMRITI/SATI was translated into Chinese/Japanese as NEN, which means thought or idea, but also attention or care. And it is clear that the English term *mindfulness* in normal usage reflects the intellectual function rather strongly, and that its root in the word *mind* provides us with a very strong association with thinking.

The problem revolves around what is meant by *mind* in Buddhism. In Japanese, the character translated as *mind* is SHIN. But SHIN doesn't mean exactly the same as the English term *mind*. It means something nearer to attentive consciousness, referring to both mind and heart, and there is a separate term for purely intellectual activity. Note here that, unlike in English, in Japanese the term for heart/mind (SHIN) and the term for mindfulness (NEN) are etymologically unrelated. However, the term SHIN occurs throughout Dogen's writings with great frequency, and it is important to gain an understanding of what he means when he uses this term. For example, what is the "*mind of the Buddhas*" that he refers to in many places in the Shobogenzo? In the koan stories, masters often state that "*the mind of the Buddhas is fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles*". This rather strange assertion says that mind *is* just the world in front of us. One face of reality is our mental interpretation (mind), and the other face is physical phenomena (fences, walls, tiles and pebbles). When we act, we enter a state where we do not separate mind and physical phenomena; we enter reality itself. And the statement "*the mind of the Buddhas is fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles*" is saying that the Buddhist state is one in which we do not separate mind and phenomena or mind and

the external world. This assertion is difficult for the Western mind to grasp, since our culture teaches us that thought is separate from, and precedes and directs our actions. We have come to believe that this is a true description of events in our lives, and thus we give greater value to getting the thinking right before and during acting than to the action itself. Thus we often "taint" our actions with thoughts on how to act right, a state that we can describe as splitting ourselves into two, or *having two moons*. The phrase "*the mind of the Buddhas is fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles*" means that when we are acting, mind and external phenomena are unseparated or whole. Although the "enlightened" state of a buddha is often described as some special spiritual state, in Dogen's teachings, the mental state of an "awakened" person is "different from thinking"; a state in which the separation between intellectual thought and physical perception drops away. He calls this state *action* and describes it as *dropping off body and mind*.

In Western thought, mental function is separated from physical function to a very much greater extent than in the East (China, Japan, Korea), and this is reflected in the structure of our languages. This may be said to result from a belief in the West (reinforced by Christianity) that there is a soul/mental persona that is "in charge of" and separate from the body. This way of thinking did not originate in the East. It can be easily traced back as far as Greek philosophers such as Plato, and even before that in the teachings of the Zoroastrians. Believing that there is a mind/soul separate from and controlling the body, we also believe that this mental persona should watch our physical body to make sure it is doing things correctly. Thus we split ourselves into two. And the structure of European languages reinforces this idea more than in Chinese or Japanese. For example, we say "I must make sure that I do this correctly", "Watch what you are doing", "Think before you act" and similar phrases, which suggest that the mental persona monitors the body in carrying out its right action. Many people interpret *mindfulness* on this basis. Since traditional Christian teachings encourage us to become closer to God, naturally we want to become better human beings, more compassionate, kinder, more understanding, more caring. Not only do we want to improve ourselves in this way, but we also want to monitor ourselves during this process. Not only do we want to *be* good and *do* good – we want to *see* ourselves doing good, and *see* that we have done good. I am suggesting that we unconsciously transfer this view – one that is deeply rooted in Christian cultures – to our understanding of Buddhist teachings.

But this way of understanding Buddhism is completely different from Master Dogen's teachings, and I believe it obscures what the Buddha was trying to teach. It is clear that Dogen taught that the Buddhist state is a state in which there is no *second person* monitoring the actions of the body, as illustrated in the koan story. This suggests that our Western way of viewing activity as a mental or moral persona monitoring our physical actions is different from Buddhist teachings. The Chinese masters and Dogen urge us to get rid of this *second person*. This refers to a state of complete attention to or involvement in the task at hand, not a state in which we are thinking about or monitoring

what we are doing in any way. This state neither includes the intention to do the task perfectly – to do good – neither does it include the intention not to make a mistake; rather it is a natural or normal state in which we are acting fully and freely at the moment of the present. This state is one in which we do not worry about – that is, we transcend – right and wrong. It could be called a "stupid" or naive attitude to the task at hand, since we throw away all thoughts about what we are doing, and simply *do*. Simple action at the moment of the present is not the result of thinking according to Dogen. And the rightness of the action is not a result of our mind being full of right thoughts about how to act, but is determined by our overall psycho-physiological state at the moment of action. In Dogen's terms, a balanced body-and-mind produces right action. And he denies that there is anything called "right" waiting somewhere for someone to come and do it. Thus right or moral action for Dogen is in the act itself, not in an abstract notion of right.

There is a continuing problem with using the word *mindfulness* in the West simply because of our long and deeply rooted historical perception of a mind/moral persona controlling the physical actions of the body. Western morality is also based on this perception. Because of the powerful influence of the mind/body duality on Western thought and religion, it is extremely difficult to grasp exactly what Dogen is teaching.

If we see mindfulness as a state to be practiced and attained, we attempt to use our mental faculties to monitor ourselves, with the aim of improving our behaviour. If we see oneness as a state in which we have to monitor ourselves putting together the two separate parts that we call body and mind, we are intentionally trying to attain something. In Buddhist terms, this is the state of *two moons*. But when we see mindfulness as dropping off awareness of body and mind, as in the *oneness in action* that Dogen teaches, then we are unlearning the split between body and mind that our culture has taught us to value so highly. We need to explain that *mindfulness* means not a split state, but a state of wholeness or oneness in action. This is the state of *one moon*. Since this is an act of removing or dropping off, it feels like a loss, rather than a gain. It feels more disappointing than satisfying, and it feels more stupid than clever. This is the way that Dogen teaches.

Interpreting *mindfulness* as one body-mind doing one task at the present moment, there is no second person to think about what we are doing and no-one to judge our action in that moment. Mental processes occur in the period of reflection before our action starts and after it is finished. In the moment of action, we throw these away, and act wholly, fully, in oneness. Dogen teaches that the practice of Zazen –sitting without intention – is the method that the Buddha taught to drop off the separation that human beings have introduced between the physical and mental. In Zazen we sit in the area between the physical and the mental. This is why Dogen teaches that Zazen is not concentrating on thoughts or images, and neither is it concentrating on physical activity such as breathing or chanting. It is sitting in the state of balanced action; a state of oneness in which the *mind of the Buddhas* emerges

quite naturally. And Dogen says in the Fukan-zazengi chapter of the Shobogenzo *"If you practice the state like this for a long time, you will surely become the state like this itself. The treasure-house will open naturally, and you will be free to receive and use its contents as you like".*

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